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SOUTH VIETNAM: President Thieu's camp appears to be doing its best to eliminate Vice President Ky from the presidential race.

Although reports are not complete for much of the country, [redacted]

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[redacted] Thieu's organization has already collected over 400 signed endorsements from the 550 provincial and city councilors, often with the help of heavy pressure from the province chiefs. In Military Region 3 all but one of the 93 provincial councilors have reportedly endorsed the President.

Although Thieu may not be aware of all the details, he appears to have directed application of the necessary pressures to be handled at the local level by the province chiefs. The arm-twisting powers of an aroused province chief are great; his cooperation is essential to virtually every local project and as a last resort he can fire provincial councilors on various legal pretexts. [redacted]

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A number of provincial councilors who have not signed for Thieu are reluctant to endorse Ky, especially representatives of the An Quang Buddhists who recall the suppression of their struggle movement in 1966 by Ky and his supporters. [redacted]

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[redacted] it appears that Ky's present total of signed endorsements is quite low, probably no more than 30. Under the election law, a candidate must acquire endorsements from 100 councilors or 40 national assemblymen. With so many endorsements already committed to the President, it seems unlikely that Ky will obtain the necessary signatures by the filing date of 4 August.

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Big Minh, on the other hand, is expected to qualify with ease. If Minh continues to show reluctance for a tough political fight, however, and concludes that the government's tactic of eliminating Ky offers him little chance of winning, Minh may make good his threat to quit. This would leave Thieu with no credible opponent on election day.

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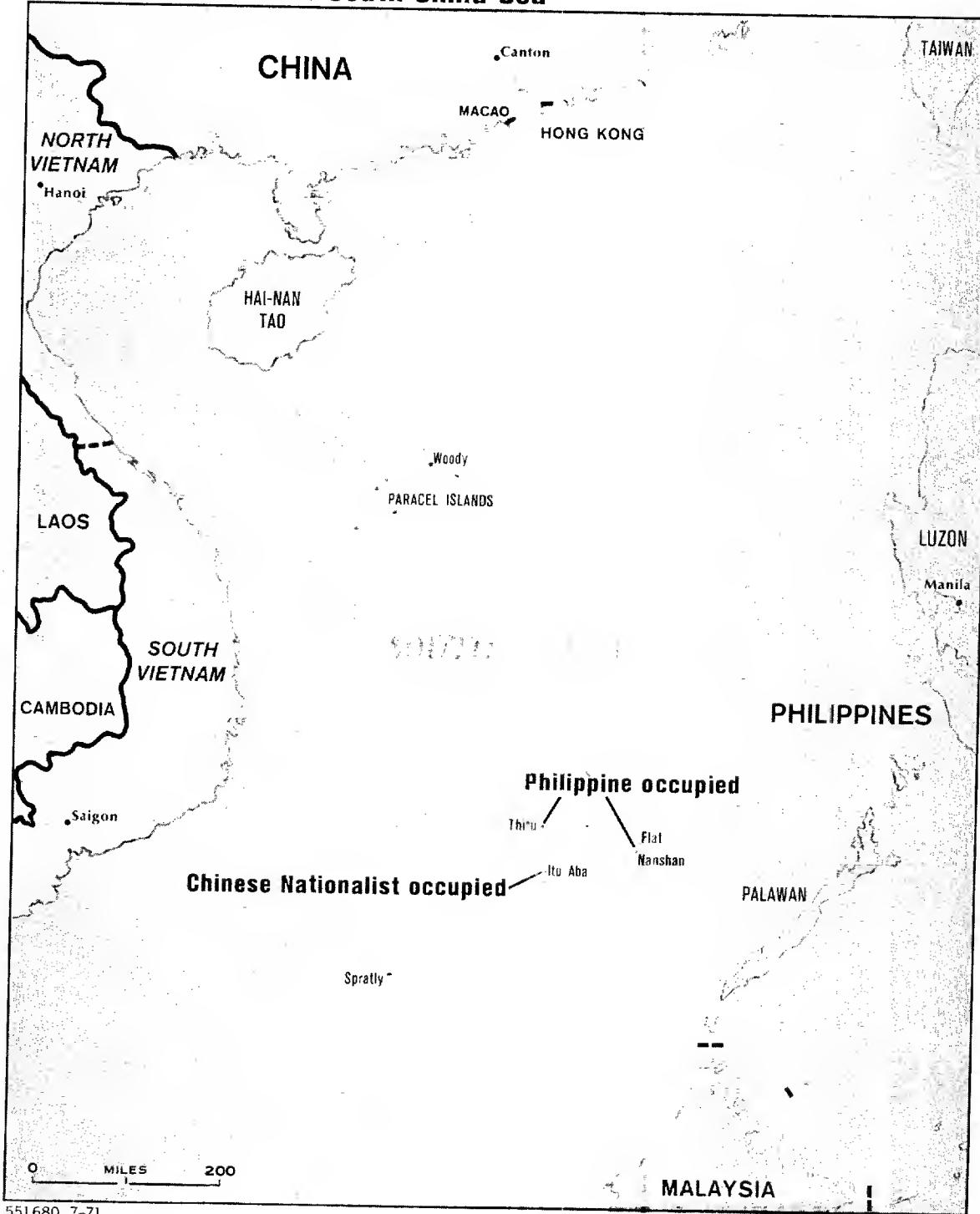
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Contested Islands in South China Sea



PHILIPPINES-CHINA: Manila is pressing its interest in the internationally contested Spratly Island area in the South China Sea although its maneuverability on the issue is severely limited by strong counterclaims from Taipei and Peking.

Motivated by geological reports that the shallow waters adjacent to some of the Spratlys are potentially rich in oil, President Marcos publicly asked Nationalist China earlier this month to withdraw its battalion-sized military garrison from the island of Itu Aba. Taipei firmly rejected the request. In mid-July, Peking issued a strongly worded statement reasserting a broad claim to the Spratlys and denouncing Philippine attempts to "encroach on China's territory."

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The closest Philippine military units are located on three islets 50 to 100 miles from Itu Aba and probably consist of no more than 150 navy and marine personnel. Manila's capability to reinforce these elements is severely limited.

The historic Chinese claim to the Spratlys has been reinforced since 1946 by Taipei's military occupation of Itu Aba. Recently, the issue of sovereignty has been complicated by South Vietnam's reaffirmation of its long-standing claim to the island group. Philippine interest in the Spratlys dates from 1956, when a Philippine private citizen claimed personal ownership of the eastern islands in the group--known by the Filipinos as "Freedomland"--on the basis of his exploration and commercial exploitation of the area.

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In view of Taipei's unqualified rejection of the Philippine demand and Peking's subsequently strong reassertion of its claim, it seems likely that the Philippines will refrain from taking measures to oust the Nationalists. The Philippine desire for oil--the nation has no known petroleum deposits--suggests, however, that Manila may still consider occupying other islands in the group.

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